Editorial: Art, crafts, community

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Organizers of seasonal arts festivals and craft fairs are reporting that attendance this year is up and sales have been brisk. That is good news for Vermont artists.

Every holiday season, we use this space to remind readers that it is important to buy local. Buying works of art or handmade crafts as one-of-a-kind gifts make the giving even more special. Fortunately for us, Vermont is packed with creative, talented individuals.

Starting a few days after Halloween, we all start to get bombarded by glossy advertisements, shipping countdowns and endless digital carts promising the lowest prices of the year. It feels relentless (and a test for how quickly the recycle bin fills). It may feel convenient, but it is quite impersonal. That's precisely why there is something quietly radical, deeply meaningful and economically sound about choosing to buy locally produced art and craft goods, especially around the holiday season.

A stroll through the Studio Place Arts member show in Barre is a revelation. It makes one realize that local art is not simply another category of merchandise. It is the physical manifestation of a region's culture, creativity and collective story. When you buy a painting or print, a hand-thrown mug from a potter down the road, or a hand-stitched scarf from a neighbor, you are not only giving a gift — you are investing in the heritage and vitality of your own community.

We need those local connections. Supporting local artists is an act of civic responsibility. Artists, crafters and makers are among the small business owners who form the backbone of local economies. Their studios may be modest, but their impact is significant. Dollars spent locally circulate locally: For every purchase from a neighborhood craftsperson, far more of that money stays in the community than when buying from national retailers. That revenue helps support local suppliers, landlords, farmers' markets, galleries, arts centers and even town budgets.

We see it as a virtuous cycle that strengthens the economic foundations of Main Street.

Beyond the economics, buying local art elevates the human relationships that the holiday season is meant to celebrate. Artisans do not mass-produce; they create. Their work reflects long hours of learning, experimenting, failing, refining and mastering a form. A hand-carved wooden spoon, a sculpted mushroom, or a hand-sewn quilt carries the mark of the maker. There is no algorithm curating that unique purchase. It comes down to the beauty of imperfection and the value of craft.

Plus, these gifts are just more thoughtful. Isn't that what we aim for when giving? Anyone can click "buy now." It takes intention to walk into a local studio sale, craft fair or downtown gallery and search for something that speaks to a loved one's personality or passions. That intention is felt by both giver and receiver. A locally crafted ornament, a framed print of a familiar landscape, or a piece of jewelry designed by someone we know holds a story. And that story becomes part of holiday traditions for years to come.

But there are other considerations, too. Vermont has plenty of shoppers who take environmental considerations into account. Locally crafted goods use regional materials and require far less shipping, packaging and waste than imports. In contrast to fast-fashion accessories or cheaply produced decor that may break or be discarded after a season, handmade items tend to last. Many are created with sustainability in mind — recycled fibers, repurposed metals, low-waste production techniques. (And rightly so. Climate concerns should be shaping public policy and personal choice, so buying locally made goods is a practical, immediate way we all can reduce our holiday footprint.)

For us, though, the crux of the locally made gift comes down to the way local art nurtures the cultural life of our community. Vibrant arts scenes do not appear on their own. They require audiences, patrons and everyday residents willing to champion local talent. When you purchase work from an artist, you are encouraging them to keep creating — to take risks, to innovate, to deepen the cultural richness around all of us.

Towns that have invested in the arts are consistently shown to be more resilient and more attractive to young families, entrepreneurs and visitors. (Point to almost every town or city in Vermont.) A thriving arts community is a signal that a community values creativity, individuality — and shared experiences. That is invaluable.

Walking through SPA, or other galleries and venues, or visiting craft fairs for an afternoon truly encourages us to slow down, wander, talk with neighbors and friends, discover talents, and appreciate the abundance of creativity. In many ways, these events feel like antidotes to the chaos of big-box holiday shopping — a chance to enjoy the season rather than rush through it.

Buying locally produced art and craft goods is about reflecting the values we say we hold dear, especially this time of year: generosity, community, authenticity and gratitude. It is about using our dollars to support people we know, or could know. It is about recognizing that small acts — the choice of one gift over another — can strengthen local economies and enrich us over and over again.